Essays in Philosophy

ISSN 1526-0569

Volume 18, Issue 1 (2017)

The Other Half of Effective Altruism: Selective Asceticism

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Abstract

What I seek to do in this paper is to reemphasize what I see as the forgotten or neglected other half of the effective altruist equation. Effective altruists need to take seriously the ways in which their actions contribute to systemic inequality and structural violence. Charitable donation is not enough to create a paradigm shift or stop systemic injustice. In tackling systemic injustice, the ascetic response may allow effective altruists to attack the roots of the problem more directly. Further, the cost-benefit analysis and randomized controlled trials favored by the movement can produce distinctly biased perceptions that leave effective altruists blind to the political dimensions of many types of harm. Balancing ascetic approaches to combating suffering may temper the overzealous focus on cost-effective charities and make room for the support of the causes this narrow focus excludes. Ultimately, this paper defends the basic tenets of effective altruism: that we have a duty to reduce suffering in the world and that we should apply our powers of reason in order to make our labors maximally effective.

Essays Philos (2017)18:1 | DOI: 10.7710/1526-0569.1575
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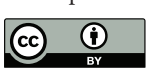

Introduction

Effective altruism is characterized by several key premises. First and foremost is the idea that we ought to make the world a better place, and that we should apply our powers of reason to the efforts we make in that regard in order to make them maximally effective. We in the First World often have more money than we need to sustain ourselves. Because of the current economic dynamics of the world, this means even small donations of what amounts to spare change for us can have significant effects on the lives of impoverished people in the Third World. These traits have led effective altruists to focus their attention on making donations to charities which have been evaluated for cost-effectiveness and which target the world's poorest people. For this reason, effective altruism has a unique relationship to money and economics. This relationship produces a distinct skew in the way effective altruists approach the issues they target, and not always for the better. In particular, the idea of *earning to give* has gained some popularity, leading some to seek high earning careers with little concern for the ethical impact of the nature of these careers in themselves.

What I seek to do in this paper is to reemphasize what I see as the forgotten or neglected other half of the effective altruist equation. Effective altruists need to take seriously the ways in which their actions contribute to systemic inequality and structural violence. Donation is not enough to create a paradigm shift or to stop systemic injustice. In addition to considering cost-benefits as they relate to charitable donations, effective altruists should be mindful consumers and mobilize their inaction for good effects as well. In order to maximize our positive influence in the world, we must mobilize not only our activist instincts, but also our *ascetic* ones. We must be able to recognize not only the types of actions that can best effect positive change, but also the types of *inaction* that can stall or reverse the root causes of suffering. Considering both our actions and inactions as representing equal opportunity for effecting change in the world gives us a more well-rounded picture of the moral landscape. This positions my article in favor of effective altruism's core premises, but against the sub-trend of earning to give.

Addressing Systemic Injustice and the Question of the Efficacy of Aid

Given the resources and wealth we in the developed countries of the West often enjoy, this places a distinct burden on us to use this privilege for good. Similar to the idea that a doctor has special duties to help the sick because he or she has more knowledge and ability to help than a layperson, so we logically have a duty to give some of our wealth away to others who do not have it, when doing so would not present a significant burden to ourselves and would significantly improve the lives of those to whom we give.

If the motivating force behind giving is not the "warm glow," as Peter Singer has been known to put it, but the chance to materially reduce suffering in the world, it seems only logical that we should be attentive to the effectiveness of our donations.

Attending to this effectiveness, however, can be a steeper challenge than it initially seems. As Andrew Kuper points out in his article, "More Than Charity," "nothing in the principle of aid or charity determines that the right action in any or all contexts is donation"[1]. To truly be effective in our altruism, we need to be able to recognize situations in which charitable giving is not the right answer, and where it may in fact cause harm. As Keith Horton notes in his article "Aid Agencies: The Epistemic Question," "Many contributors to this debate have apparently taken it that one may simply assume that the effects of the work such agencies do are overwhelmingly positive … however, one finds a number of concerns about such agencies and the work they do that put that assumption in serious doubt"[2].

Emily Clough takes the argument one step further in her article, "Effective Altruism's Political Blind Spot," in the *Boston Review*. Efficacy in aid is particularly thorny and difficult to determine. Not only is it difficult to get good data, but even the darling methods of randomized control trials (RCTs) that effective altruist organizations like GiveWell and Giving What We Can use produce distinctly skewed results[3]. She says,

> While they are good at measuring the proximate effects of a program on its immediate target subjects, RCTs are bad at detecting any unintended effects of a program, especially those effects that fall outside the population or timeframe that the organization or researchers had in mind. For example, an RCT might determine whether a bed net distribution program lowered the incidence of malaria among its target population. But it would be less likely to capture whether the program unintentionally demobilized political pressures on the government to build a more effective malaria eradication program, one that would ultimately affect more people. RCTs thus potentially miss broader insights and side effects of a program beyond its target population[4].

[1] Kuper, Andrew. "More Than Charity: Cosmopolitan Alternatives to the "Singer Solution"." *Ethics and International Affairs* 16, no. 1 (2002): 113, 107-120. doi: 10.1111/j.1747-7093.2002.tb.00378.x.

[2] Horton, Keith. "Aid Agencies: The Epistemic Question." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 28, no. 1 (2010): 29, 29-43. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-5930.2010.00504.x.

[3] Clough, Emily. "Effective Altruism's Political Blind Spot." *Boston Review*, 14 Jul 2015.

[4] Ibid.

The critical point here is that there is a political dimension to poverty that is ignored in the standard process effective altruists use to target their giving. Given this blind spot, the aid that effective altruists provide risks actually worsening some systemic problems, as Clough goes on to describe:

> In the worst case, the presence of NGOs induces exit from the state sector. When relatively efficient, well-functioning NGOs enter a health or education market, for example, citizens in that market who are paying attention are likely to switch from government services to NGO services. The result is a disengagement of the most mobilized, discerning poor citizens from the state. These are the citizens most likely to have played a previous role in monitoring the quality of state services and advocating for improvements. Once they exit, the pressure on the government to maintain and improve services eases, and the quality of government provision is likely to fall[5].

Iason Gabriel, in his article "Effective Altruism and its Critics," describes yet another scenario where effective altruism's cost-effectiveness analysis can fall short. He recounts a hypothetical situation where a charity has the option to build a water sanitation system using either outside labor or members of the recipient community to construct it[6]. The outside laborers, since they are professionals, will surely build a better system that will be less likely to need repair in the near future, making them the more cost-effective investment[7]. However, as Gabriel points out, this leaves no room in the calculus for the emotional investment of the community in the project if allowed to build the system themselves[8]. He says, "we might believe that it is valuable for people to choose the path their community takes and to participate in realising these goals, for reasons of autonomy and self-esteem. After all, there is an important moral difference between a receiving something as a gift and bringing it into existence through one's effort"[9].

Steven G. Brown adds to the discussion in his article, "Supporting the Best Charities is Harder than it Seems," wherein he describes how GiveWell's methodology leads them

[5] Ibid.

[6] Gabriel, Iason. "Effective Altruism and its Critics." *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 2016, 9, doi: 10.1111/japp.12176.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

to "to rule out effective organizations that would do great work with further funding"[10]. Specifically, he argues,

> GiveWell focuses on charitable work that is clearly measurable, ruling out crucial work that is not easily measured. By setting up experiments, they select projects that have clear, small-scale deliverables that can be easily counted. This usually leads them to medical and health programs such as vaccinations and clean water methods. GiveWell's methodology prioritizes easily measurable metrics, and those outcomes that can also be researched and tracked in a particularly rigorous way. This leads to their most serious drawback: overlooking projects that should be a high priority, but are difficult to measure. When one takes a step back and asks what it would take to better a place that is not doing well, one will surely come across many difficult to measure answers. For example, it is striking that since it began giving ratings in 2008, GiveWell has only recommended a single international educational charity. Pratham is an organization that runs an innovative and extraordinarily successful reading program called Read India that trains community volunteers to be teachers in villages all across the country. Citing difficulties in measuring the effectiveness of educational projects, GiveWell stopped recommending Pratham in 2011, and has never recommended another educational charity since. This is despite the fact that education is certainly one of the most important things a community must have if it is to rise out of poverty and not merely survive[11].

Clearly, the narrow approach effective altruists have taken regarding charitable aid has significant drawbacks. Not only is its efficacy hard to determine, but the narrow focus rules out some areas which ought not be ignored. Given that I accept the first premises of effective altruism, namely, that we ought to do something to reduce suffering in the world and that we ought to attend to the efficacy of the actions we take for that purpose, it now may seem unclear what kind of action a would-be effective altruist should take against this suffering. What other methods are available?

When the question of aid's effect is unclear, we may better serve those who are suffering with ascetic responses than with donation. It might be hard to control where donated money goes, and what its effects are once it goes there. But if we identify the sources of harm, starving these sources of our tacit, unquestioned approval will eventually lead to system-wide change.

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[10] Brown, Steven G. "Supporting the Best Charities is Harder than it Seems." *Journal of Global Ethics* 12, no. 2 (2016): 242, 240-244. doi: 10.1080/17449626.2016.1205118.

[11] Ibid.

The causes of suffering can be difficult to identify and target for change through donation. This is in part because the Third World is created by the same economics that produced the First World, as Thomas Pogge describes in his article, "Responsibilities for Poverty Related Ill-Health." The global order is such that Western culture remains as dominant and influential as it was in the colonial era, and therefore, the "existing institutional order is implicated in the persistence of radical inequality [where the] better-off impose a shared institutional order on the worse-off"[12]. Donation alone will not be sufficient to remedy such system-wide structural violence. Against such sources of suffering, it may be helpful to take the ascetic's approach instead. As Kuper says, "Given the complex interdependence and economic and political perversities that characterize our shared world, the injunction 'first, do no harm' deserves at least equal consideration"[13].

Indeed, I think most effective altruists would not have a problem admitting this. When presented with the evidence that giving will not do good in one case, the effective altruist may simply redirect those potential funds toward a situation in which he or she can feel more sure that it will be of benefit. Perhaps, the effective altruist will choose to donate to developing technologies to protect humanity from cataclysm due to global warming or to medical research aimed at lifesaving drugs or eradicating disease. These are more concrete and technological sources of suffering and better suited, perhaps, to cost-effectiveness reasoning. Even so, I propose that this thinking leaves the effective altruist equation incomplete. Charitable giving is not our only opportunity to take altruistic action. Focusing solely on that misses an opportunity to expand the influence of our ethical lives.

The Case for Selective Ascetic Activism

Effective altruism's focus on money may blind the movement to ways in which the world can be improved by non-monetary or ascetic means. This focus on money and donation amounts to a kind of tunnel vision. To give an example: within the attempts to address the global warming crisis, supporting the development of alternative fuels for cars or better electric cars is a perennial favorite. Yet, new forms of cars or fuel pale in comparison to the effects on climate change that could be produced from simply reducing the need for cars at all. Developing better, more efficient, public transport would

[12] Pogge, Thomas. "Responsibilities for Poverty Related Ill-Health." *Ethics & International Affairs* 16, no. 2 (2002): 71, 71-79. doi: 10.1111/j.1747-7093.2002.tb00398.x.

[13] Kuper, Andrew. "More Than Charity: Cosmopolitan Alternatives to the "Singer Solution"." *Ethics and International Affairs* 16, no. 1 (2002): 114, 107-120. doi: 10.1111/j.1747-7093.2002.tb.00378.x.

have a much more drastic impact. Better still, we could redesign cities and transport to not rely as heavily on cars at all and adjust the culture to move away from seeing cars as basic needs (as they are often seen in the United States) and more as expensive luxuries. Individuals can propel change of this kind with investments or donations (the typical effective altruist approach), but can also practice this by *abstaining* from the use of cars, or planes, making the choice to take public transport or walk or bike to places they need to go, or traveling less in general.

Other ascetic methods of fighting climate change are simply becoming vegetarian or vegan, since large amounts of greenhouse gases are produced through factory farming. In fact, a report by *World Watch* (2009) found that more than half of all greenhouse gases are produced from the animal agriculture industries[14]. And an Oxford study produced in 2014 by the journal, *Climatic Change*, concluded that meat-eaters are responsible for almost twice as many dietary greenhouse-gas emissions per day as vegetarians and about two and a half times as many as vegans[15]. Another option for selective asceticism is to personally choose not to have children, to reduce the burden of overpopulation. One need not take up every ascetic choice, but these options deserve at least as much recognition and attention as charitable donation.

I recognize this is not an entirely novel thing to say, as even Peter Singer in his book, *The Most Good You Can Do*, states that one of the most effective ways to decrease total suffering in the world is to stop buying or eating meat[16]. That is why I see my argument in this paper as a reemphasis, rather than a revolutionary suggestion. In fact, there are already efforts being made in this regard. We just tend not to hear about them in connection with effective altruism. Movements like *conscious consumerism* seek to better inform customers of the ethical impact of their purchases.

In Waheed Houssain's article, "Is Ethical Consumerism an Impermissible Form of Vigilantism?" he gives a thorough evaluation of several types of ethical consumerism. Citizens can use their purchasing power in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons. A conscious consumer may refrain from buying coffee produced by unfairly treated work-

[14] Goodland, Robert and Jeff Anhang. "Livestock and Climate Change." *World Watch*, November/December 2009.

[15] Scarborough, Peter, Paul N. Appleby, Anja Mizdrak, et al. "Dietary greenhouse gas emissions of meat-eaters, fish-eaters, vegetarian and vegans in the UK." *Climatic Change* 125, no. 2 (2014): 179-192. doi: 10.1007/s10584-014-1169-1.

[16] Singer, Peter. *The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism Is Changing Ideas about Living Ethically*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015, 177.

ers, or they may avoid products known to contribute to deforestation or the extinction of species in distant regions, what Houssain calls "negative ethical consumerism" because it involves refraining from buying something[17]. Conscious consumers can also take action to make the world a better place by purchasing products that have been recognized as fair trade or sustainable, what Houssain would call "positive ethical consumerism"[18].

If we accept that one of the engines of inequality and suffering in the world is rampant consumerism, then abstaining from consumerism in any way possible will help to effect change. Strategically abstaining from consumerism can attack the roots of these problems, especially when combined with advocacy and public pressure on companies that use unfair labor practices, cause deforestation, use child labor, and more.

This type of activism would be a kind of negative ethical consumerism aimed at creating systemic change, what Houssain dubs a kind of "proto-legislative" social change ethical consumerism (SCEC)[19]. The use of such strategies "essentially creates arenas of informal democratic self-governance that operate below the level of formal democratic politics"[20]. Houssain elaborates on the benefits of ethical consumer action:

> In a large, complex, and technologically sophisticated society, citizens cannot make all of the rules necessary to direct market activity to desirable outcomes through the formal legislative and regulatory process. As things stand, when issues do not make it on to the formal democratic agenda, they are left to the unregulated market. But with proto-legislative SCEC, citizens can address issues that need attention but do not get on the formal agenda through informal self-regulation in secondary arenas[21].

This type of activism can have many benefits, like helping to bring attention to issues that are "perpetually secondary" (like deforestation), and fostering a "legislative will" where citizens can organize themselves on issues that languish in formal politics[22].

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[17] Houssain, Waheed. "Is Ethical Consumerism an Impermissable Form of Vigilantism?" *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 40, no. 2 (2012): 113, 111-143. doi: 10.1111/j.1088-4963.2012.01218.x.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid, 132.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

He continues:

> A closely related benefit is increased governability. Corporations are powerful social actors, with privileged access to political authorities, and they often oppose laws that would protect the rights and interests of weaker players in the market. But the orientation of corporations is closely connected with the orientation of consumers. If consumers are narrowly interested in price and quality, without regard for how a firm delivers these goods, then firms stand to profit from reduced protections for weaker players. But if consumers are sensitive to whether a firm respects the rights and interests of others, there will be less profit to be made in taking advantage of weaker players, and this in turn will make firms less hostile to regulatory efforts to protect these players[23].

A final benefit of proto-legislative SCEC is that it can "expand the sphere of citizen engagement"[24]. Someone who does not identify with any political party or have general views about economic policy may still find it quite natural to express his or her wishes for the common good through everyday purchases. Websites like EthicalConsumer.org provide an abundance of articles and data regarding the ethical influence of consumer choices with the aim of providing consumers the tools they need to make such decisions. Such sources of information may lead interested consumers to eventually take more active roles in democratic politics[25].

Though the kind of proto-legislative SCEC Houssain describes encompasses both positive and negative forms of ethical consumerism, I have chosen to focus on the negative form for this article, because it is often under explored and underutilized. Lumping selective asceticism in as one subcategory of ethical consumerism is misleading, since by its nature it is anti-consumerism. Thus, strategies like this can benefit from having their own name. Asceticism as activism aimed at creating systemic social change should be seen as a form of effective altruism in its own right and deserves attention as such.

[23] Ibid, 133.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

Against Earning to Give

As we've established, effective altruists are interested in (1) helping others and (2) doing so effectively. The earning to give sub-trend accepts that the best way to do so is donation to effective charities, and seeks to maximize their power to do so by seeking careers with the most financial potential. But as I have demonstrated, we have serious reason to question the faith effective altruists have placed in the benefits of donation. This would seem to undermine the "giving" part of earning to give. But as we shall see next, there is reason to question the "earning" side as well.

Even if we give away massive sums to good causes (and even if these causes are effective), if we are not conscious of the kinds of systems to which we are giving our life and our time, we may be missing important elements of the moral picture. To give a hypothetical comparison, if you make a living slaughtering animals, but donate all your earnings above subsistence level to vegan causes … are you doing the most good you can?

To be clear, I am not arguing that charitable donation is *never* a suitable option for altruistic action. There are some cases where it can be both appropriate and effective. For instance, in combating deaths due to malaria, donating to researching and distributing treatment and to organizations which help prevent its spread may help to ultimately consign malaria to the dustbin of history. Yet, the zeal with which effective altruism has approached charitable giving is likely inflated and inappropriate. Donation can be one tool among many in the effective altruist's toolbox, but we should be very careful and attentive to the situations in which it is applied and willing to recognize its limits.

I am also not advocating a life of complete disengagement from the world. The kind of asceticism I am proposing is selective, targeted to remove support from the unjust systems in the world that profit from the exploitation of others and of the planet. Asceticism is not the only way to respond to these issues, but it is a tool that is too often neglected.

As for earning to give, it may be appropriate for a select few. But blanket approval for any job that allows you wealth and status is dangerous, no matter how altruistically one applies the wealth and status once achieved. Careers are not all morally neutral activities. Indeed, *some* careers may be neither helpful nor harmful to the world, but to an effective altruist interested in maximizing one's positive influence, the ethical potential of all the hours we spend working should not be ignored. This would seem

to place the preference back on the jobs we usually think of as morally admirable – working directly for aid agencies, becoming an activist or advocate for the worse off, becoming a doctor, etc. There is extra reason to be wary of the earning to give. High-paying jobs and high-status jobs often are high-paying and high-status because they are key positions in the very economics that maintain the First World-Third World status quo. As I have already established, this system itself is implicated in the structural violence that causes so much harm in the first place.

Ascetic strategies, on the other hand, like refusing to participate in consumerism which perpetuates the First World-Third World divide or giving up meat to reduce both greenhouse gases and prevent animal suffering can potentially transform society so that these causes of suffering eventually cease to exist. Asceticism is a form of activism in this way, and can be a form of public protest, and can help to establish and promote alternative ways of living.

Take, for example, the somewhat recent scandal around the chocolate industry, as seen in the 2010 documentary, *The Dark Side of Chocolate*. When we hear about something like a chocolate company using child labor to acquire their cocoa, we have a choice to make. Is cheap and readily available chocolate more important to us than the exploitation of a child? What can we do in a situation like this to help make the world more like we would like it to be? Here, we have a good example of why activism ought to be partnered with asceticism. Donating to charities that can help children in the Third World is only half the solution; we must also stop buying the products that come from their exploitation. By recognizing these other strategies, we may be able to enlist more people in the fight to reduce suffering in the world.

Some effective altruists will defend earning to give by arguing that if a person rejects a high-paying job in banking or finance on ethical grounds, this does nothing to prevent someone else from taking that job. Further, the person who does take the job may be less likely to donate what the effective altruist would, and less likely to advocate for reform from within the system.

To this, I will concede some ground. In the situation where an altruistic individual has the talent and opportunity, I would not automatically condemn the acceptance of such a career choice. Yet, I would also be keen to point out that donating all the money earned from such a job to effective charities does not go far enough. The emphasis for the truly effective altruist interested in earning to give needs to be on the creation of systemic institutional change. Thus, I would argue that for such individuals, advocacy for reform from within should be the primary target when making such

a career choice. If such advocacy is effective, then the negative effects of the career choice would vanish, and so would my objections.

Yet, I think it is worth pointing out that careers come with cultures and social pressures of their own. Our moral motivations are often influenced by our social groups, so we should cultivate those groups carefully. It would be arrogant to assume that we are immune to the potentially negative effects of peer pressure just because we go in with good intentions. Changing the system from within is an admirable goal, but much harder to accomplish than many people may assume. Individuals who have interest in the path of earning to give should undertake it with due consideration.

Addressing the "Overdemandingness" Objection

Effective altruism may indeed have an undue emphasis on donation and a potentially counter-productive love affair with earning to give. However, its central claims remain unchallenged, even when these two expressions of the movement fall apart. One common objection levied at the very heart of effective altruism is the worry that it is overly demanding. Even the ascetic strategies I am proposing are open to this accusation. Being informed enough about the wide ranging effects of our everyday purchases, the ethical influence of our jobs upon the world, and of every choice we make regarding where to place our money and our time is a steep task. Some worry that such a high standard of ethical behavior would actually reduce the value of our lives.

This fear is echoed by Kuper in his objection to Peter Singer. Kuper fears that Singer's suggestions will prompt any of us who wish to lead ethical lives to "give up any job that doesn't directly or maximally involve saving lives"[26]. Kuper argues, "there are many values other than survival: Can it be morally required to give up vital sources of meaning, such as the work we do, the social commitments we have, and the knowledge and excellences we pursue?"[27].

The objection stems, perhaps, from the effective altruist slogan which is the title of one of Peter Singer's recent books, *The Most Good You Can Do*. This is the battle-cry of the effective altruist. Worries of overdemandingness arise from the first half of the phrase. Doing the "most good" possible seems to imply that this is a never ending task. Indeed, for effective altruists it is a never ending obligation. Yet, I find the overdemandingness

[26] Kuper, Andrew. "More Than Charity: Cosmopolitan Alternatives to the "Singer Solution"." *Ethics and International Affairs* 16, no. 1 (2002): 110, 107-120. doi: 10.1111/j.1747-7093.2002.tb.00378.x.

[27] Ibid.

objection implausible because there are many activities and obligations we accept in life that are similarly never ending. For example, it is widely accepted that we ought to maintain our health. It may not be seen as a moral obligation, but it is an obligation we accept despite the fact that none of us will ever be able to achieve a state of perfect health and sustain it ad infinitum.

Most of us do not see maintaining our health as overly demanding and we know that despite our best efforts to stay healthy, we will still inevitably fall sick and even die at some point. We don't see this as somehow undermining the value of trying to be as healthy as we can while we still live. This is because it is so clearly vital to the other things we care about in our lives. Everything else we enjoy, we enjoy longer and more fully when we're healthy. I would argue the same for the kind of ethical attentiveness that effective altruists adopt. Those who believe effective altruism is overly demanding focus on the "doing the most good" part and neglect second half of that phrase which constrains it. Doing the most good one can is the same level of demandingness as being as healthy as one can be. It allows room for balancing effective altruism with other values and activities. The selective asceticism I am advocating here is likewise able to preserve the kinds of things we commonly hold dear in life. We can still enjoy all manner of pursuits, like art, or music, writing novels, etc. as long as we care enough to ensure these activities do not harm others. We need not perceive these activities as "time wasted" that we could have spent helping others, or earning more in order to give more away.

Just as one can select between worthy causes to which to donate, one can also select between various ascetic practices. For some of us, being vegan could be too taxing on our personal health, and for others to abstain from having children would bring severe emotional pain. We need not all live the life of a childless bicycling vegan. Yet, we can and should think strategically about our "negative" ethical options. For those of us who would not suffer from such forms of asceticism, it can be a powerful tool to effect positive change in the world. For those of us who would suffer, there are still a host of other opportunities to make a difference, and these tend to be the ones we already know about – volunteering, donating to charities, etc.

As Anthony Skelton observes in his article, "The Ethical Principles of Effective Altruism," what truly unites the effective altruist community is a common perspective characterized by:

> First, a heightened receptivity to evidence and facts in thinking about how best to achieve philanthropic ends. Second, effective altruists have, perhaps

> unwittingly, hit on a sensible way of … reconciling prudence and beneficence; they appear to have stumbled on what psychologists have been reporting, that above a certain threshold increases in income and wealth produce fewer and less long-lasting increases in life satisfaction. Effective altruists have discovered that for happiness, for life satisfaction, one needs much less materially than our cultural norms suggest[28].

In reality, the effective altruist life is not a life so burdened as to be devoid of any pleasure. In fact, altruism and asceticism go hand in hand to produce more happiness for effective altruists themselves, as well as helping to alleviate suffering for others in the world.

Conclusion

Effective altruism gets many things right: we have a duty to help others, no matter how distant, and we have the privileged position in the West that our spare change can make significant impact on those far away. It is good to bring attention to the moral potential of our money, but it is short-sighted to think that some of the problems of the world can be solved merely by donating. Because of the emphasis on "effectiveness," it should be natural for effective altruism to seek solutions that prevent harm rather than just ameliorate it after the fact, which is why it is strange that ascetic strategies are often so neglected.

Effective altruism as a movement has developed an unhealthy obsession with cost-effectiveness analysis and randomized controlled trials, which has led them away from what should be their core mission. It has left the movement unable to spot effective solutions to systemic sources of suffering, which often have political dimensions that are hard to measure with the quantitative approaches the movement favors. However, none of these flaws are fatal. Donating to effective charities has only ever been a part of the broader cause and it is time to give more attention to the other approaches available. The first rule of getting out of a hole is to stop digging. This is what the ascetic's approach to effective altruism seeks to reemphasize. This is also what the earning to give trend seems to neglect. Both the earning to give approach and extreme asceticism to the point of complete disengagement from society fail to effect positive change in the world in a maximal way. I am arguing for what I see as the middle way, where attention is devoted equally to the effects our money can have on the world and to the nature of

[28] Skelton, Anthony. "The Ethical Principles of Effective Altruism." *Journal of Global Ethics* 12, no. 2, (2016): 144, 137-146. doi: 10.1080/17449626.2016.1193552.

the activities to which we devote our time. In doing that, we have the opportunity to create a more just and fair global order, and reduce the negative impact of structural violence.

This places a burden on us to be informed of the far-reaching consequences both of our actions and of our inactions. The most effective altruistic life will be demanding, but not incongruous with our other values. We must seek out opportunities to help others, *and* we must stop contributing to systems which harm them. Through a balance of selective asceticism and cost-effective charitable donations we have huge and mostly untapped potential to transform our world. We don't need to think our actions will create a perfect world in order for them to be worth doing. Making the world a better place should not be seen as a burdensome addition to our lives, but rather an enriching dimension. Looking after our positive impact on the world is like looking after our own health. It is negative and counterproductive when we become obsessive about it, but, for most of us, it is important enough to devote daily activity toward, through both positive actions and selective abstinence. [29]

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[29] I'd like to include a special thanks to the International Society for Utilitarian Studies for letting me present this paper at their conference at Lille Catholic University in July of 2016. I'd like to thank Peter Singer for giving me feedback on my paper at the conference, and thank Thomas Ferretti for his thoughtful notes on a previous draft.

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